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WORLD POPULATION GROWTH SLOWS

ANNCR:

A PROMINENT AMERICAN FOOD AND POPULATION SPECIALIST BELIEVES THE LONG-EXPECTED DOUBLING OVER THE NEXT GENERATION OF THE WORLD'S CURRENT POPULATION OF FOUR THOUSAND MILLION IS NOT LIKELY TO MATERIALIZE ... AS WE HEAR IN THIS REPORT BY VOA'S ERICA BENIS.

VOICE:

MALTHUS WARNED MANKIND ABOUT THE RISKS OF WAR, PESTILENCE AND FAMINE IF MAN DID NOT PAY ATTENTION TO THE GROWING IMBALANCE BETWEEN FOOD AND POPULATION. MODERN-DAY EXPERTS EMPHASIZE THE FACT THAT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY MAY WELL BE THE LAST ONE IN WHICH WE STILL HAVE THE CHOICE BETWEEN PROGRESS AND DISASTER. ONE CAN THUS TAKE HEART FROM A REPORT BY LESTER BROWN, PRESIDENT OF THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE, THAT OVER THE PAST DECADE THE RATE OF GROWTH OF THE WORLD POPULATION BEGAN TO SLOW.

WRITING IN THE "NEW YORK TIMES," DOCTOR BROWN SAYS THERE ARE TWO REASONS FOR THE SLOWING IN POPULATION GROWTH: FIRST, AN IMPRESSIVE DECLINE OF BIRTH RATES IN NATIONS WITH FORTY PER CENT OF WORLD'S POPULATION, AND,SECOND, A MORE SOBERING REASON, THE SHORTAGE OF FOOD THAT HAS LED TO RISING DEATH RATES IN MORE DENSELY POPULATED, POORER COUNTRIES. SLOWING POPULATION GROWTH, HE WRITES, HAS BEEN CONCENTRATED IN THREE GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS: WESTERN EUROPE, NORTH AMERICA AND EAST ASIA.

IN THIS DECADE, THE POPULATION GROWTH RATE FELL BY ALMOST ONE HALF IN WESTERN EUROPE. AT THE SAME TIME, EAST GERMANY, WEST GERMANY, LUXEMBOURG AND AUSTRIA BROUGHT THEIR POPULATION GROWTH TO A HALT, WHILE COUNTRIES LIKE FRANCE, ITALY, SWEDEN,

NORWAY, DENMARK, THE NETHERLANDS AND SWITZERLAND ARE APPROACHING A BALANCE BETWEEN BIRTH AND DEATH RATES. THE UNITED STATES, ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST POPULOUS COUNTRIES, HAS WITNESSED A MORE THAN THIRTY PER CENT DROP IN BIRTH RATES BETWEEN 1970 AND 1975. LOWER BIRTH RATES HAVE ALSO BEEN RECORDED IN EASTERN EUROPE, THE SOVIET UNION, JAPAN, AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND AND CANADA.

DOCTOR BROWN SAYS THAT THESE FALLING BIRTH RATES REFLECT BOTH A DESIRE FOR SMALLER FAMILIES AND THE WIDENING AVAILABILITY OF FAMILY PLANNING SERVICES, INCLUDING CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION. SINCE 1970 THE USE OF THE BIRTH CONTROL PILL HAS INCREASED ON EVERY CONTINENT, WHILE ABORTION LAWS HAVE BEEN LIBERALIZED. IN INDIA, WHERE FAMILY PLANNING HAS NOT BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL, THE GOVERNMENT HAS INITIATED, AS A LAST RESORT, THE USE OF COMPULSORY STERILIZATION. AND, IN LATIN AMERICA, MEXICO HAS EMBARKED ON A MASSIVE NATIONAL FAMILY PLANNING EFFORT.

BUT THE MOST IMPRESSIVE DECLINE IN BIRTH RATES IN RECENT YEARS HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. DOCTOR BROWN EXPLAINS THAT THIS WAS POSSIBLE BECAUSE THE CHINESE EFFORT FOCUSES NOT ONLY UPON FAMILY PLANNING SERVICES BUT ALSO UPON RESHAPING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES ENCOURAGING SMALL FAMILIES. THE ACHIEVEMENTS, HE WRITES, IS ALL THE MORE NOTEWORTHY GIVEN CHINA'S RELATIVELY LOW AVERAGE INCOME PER PERSON.

UNFORTUNATELY, FAR TOO MANY COUNTRIES STILL HAVE HIGH BIRTH RATES. AND, IRONICALLY, IF THEY DON'T BRING BIRTH RATES UNDER CONTROL, THEIR POPULATION GROWTH WILL SLOW BECAUSE OF RISING DEATH RATES. BUT THE DECLINE IN BIRTH RATES IN THE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD AND IN CHINA, AS DOCTOR BROWN CONCLUDES IS A HOPEFUL SIGN.

JS/PBM